

# 1919: Winnipeg general strike



A short history of Canada's Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.

Throughout the spring of 1919, Winnipeg had been buzzing with the fervour of militant unionism among the working class. The city had witnessed a general strike the year previously, which had ended with partial gains for workers. Unemployment was high, wages were low and conditions poor. Soldiers returning from Europe after World War I were met with the fact that while they had been risking their lives in the trenches, companies at home had been making large profits from war contracts.

These conditions, coupled with the still fresh memories of the events of Russia in 1917, the successes of the One Big Union idea championed by the Industrial Workers of the World union in the United States (especially the general strike in Seattle that had occurred in the February of 1919) which acted as an example to many workers, created a confrontation between labour and capital that would come to a head with a general strike.

In March of 1919, labour leaders responded to the calls of workers with a meeting in Calgary, to discuss the formation of a One Big Union to win improvements in wages and conditions, as well as union recognition, which many workers didn't have. Due to Canada's virtually non-existent labour laws of the time, union recognition could only be officially recognised if an employer voluntarily decided to recognise the union, or through strike action by workers.

The immediate catalyst to the general strike was a conflict between the unions of building and metal workers, who had grouped together respectively under the Building and Metals Trades Councils, and their employers at the Winnipeg Builder's Exchange. The worker's representatives of the Building Trades Council demanded higher wages and improved conditions. However, their employers refused to recognise the union and would not enter negotiations, so a strike was launched on May 1.

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the Building and Metal Trades Councils asked the much larger Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council (WTLC) for assistance with the strike and its members were balloted as to whether to strike in support of the striking builders and metalworkers.

The results of the ballot were released on May 13, with members of the WTLC voting overwhelmingly for a general strike. The results surprised even the leaders of the WTLC, who expected solid support for the strike from the traditionally strong unions of railwaymen, foundry workers and factory workers, but found very strong support from other sectors, such as the fire fighters, cooks and waiters, tailors and even the police union.

The general strike was called on the 15th and a Central Strike Committee, comprised of elected members of unions affiliated to the WTLC, was set up to oversee the action and to make sure essential services still operated. Between 30-35,000 workers were on strike on the 15th, with union members being joined by thousands of non-union workers.

A counter-strike committee known as the Citizen's Committee of 1000 was almost immediately set up, which was essentially a group of Winnipeg's wealthiest industrialists, lawyers, bankers and politicians. Rather unsurprisingly, the Citizen's Committee, together with local newspapers (most of whose

employees were on strike) launched a campaign against the strike in an attempt to discredit the actions of the workers, blaming the strike on

"Bolsheviks", "alien scum" and "bohunks". Papers ran cartoons showing bomb throwing hook-nosed Jews and the New York Times ran a headline of "Bolshevism Invades Canada".

There was of course no evidence to suggest that European workers had been in any way involved in leading the Winnipeg strike. The Citizen's Committee also dismissed most of the city's police force and installed their own militia since the Committee could not rely on the police force as the majority of police officers were striking.

As word of the strike spread, workers in other towns and cities across Canada declared themselves in solidarity with the Winnipeg strike and many strikes were announced in Brandon, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Regina, Vancouver, New Westminster, Victoria and up to 20 other towns.

Fearing the growing number of strikes and unrest across the country, the Federal Government decided to intervene and on May 22 sent the Labour Minister, Gideon Decker Robertson, and the Interior Minister, Arthur Meighen to meet with the Citizen's Committee and local government officials. An invitation to meet with the Strike Committee was declined. Upon the advice of the ministers, the government swiftly ordered all federal employees back to work or face dismissal, amended the Immigration Act so that British born workers could be deported and had the criminal code's definition of sedition broadened.

On May 30, members of the police force were told to sign a contract to prevent them from joining unions, they refused, but said that they would still maintain law and order. A few days later the entire police force was fired. June 1 saw the arrival of 100,000 soldiers home from Europe, who marched upon the mayor's office to declare themselves in solidarity with the strikers. The broadening of the sedition act led to the arrest of 10 strike leaders on June 17, as well as numerous arrests under the changed immigration laws. Rioting occurred throughout cities where strikes were being held, and over half of those arrested were freed.

To protest the arrest of the strike leaders, thousands of workers converged on Market Square in downtown Winnipeg on June 21 whereupon they were read the Riot Act by the mayor, who then called on the North West Mounted Police to

disperse the strikers. As the mounted police charged, the crowds scattered into alleyways and side streets off the square, where they were met by "special police" who had been deputised by the city during the strike. Armed with baseball bats and other weaponry provided by local retailers, the special police fought

with strikers. During the ensuing chaos 30 strikers were injured, and two were killed, the day becoming known as Bloody Saturday.

With troops occupying the streets, the combined force of local government and the employers forced the strike to end on June 25, six of the arrested strike leaders were released soon after.

The remaining arrested men were convicted of "conspiracy to overthrow the government"

and faced jail terms of six months to two years.

Labour militancy continued to act as a strong force in Canada throughout the early 1920s, especially in the coalmines of Alberta and Nova Scotia where a series of confrontations occurred into the mid-1920s. The labour movement eventually succumbed to the damage of anti-union campaigning, employers and government using the Red Scare to discredit the unions, and many factory employers setting up shop committees, from where they could monitor their employees activities carefully.

For six weeks during the summer of 1919, the working class of Winnipeg withdrew their labour from their employers and participated in the largest strike action in Canadian labour history, with support in the form of strikes and protests occurring across the whole of Canada, involving hundreds of thousands of workers. Although defeated and demoralised, the strikers of Winnipeg who, instead of asking of their employers what was rightfully theirs, took strike action and demanded it, were instrumental in laying the foundations for the improvements in conditions, wages and union recognition rights which occurred in Canada over the next 30 years.